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Soviet Is Said to Wait and Watch As Reagan's Policies Take Shape

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WASHINGTON, July 26 — Diplomats from Eastern and Western Europe have concluded that, for the time being, Moscow has settled on a wait-and-see strategy toward the Reagan Administration rather than a stepping up the level of confrontation as Soviet officials were suggesting at the beginning of the year.

Soviet officials continue to tell diplomats here and private visitors to Moscow of "real dangers" and "possible confrontations" that lie ahead if President Reagan does not alter his hard-line policies. But at the same time, they continue to express the hope that the "realities" of domestic economic troubles and pressure from allies will force Mr. Reagan to moderate his course.

Administration officials who specialize in Soviet affairs and non-Governmental experts offered two explanations for this holding pattern of neither causing additional problems nor making concessions to the Reagan Administration. First, given Moscow's own array of problems from the economy to Afghanistan, it may not be in a position to cause more problems than there already are. Second, Soviet leaders made difficult internal compromises to launch détente, and they may not be eager to try forging a new consensus simply because of Mr. Reagan's public statements on the Soviet Union. They want to see how far the President will go in translating the statements into action.

Open Communication

In the meantime, the Russians are seeking to keep open lines of communication. Last Friday, they agreed to resume buying American grain for the first time since the lifting of the American grain embargo several months ago. The Soviet leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, continues to let it be known that he would be prepared to meet with Mr. Reagan at any time. This is in contrast to the position he took four years ago that he would not meet with President Carter until after the completion of a new arms control treaty.

The Soviet experts dispute whether the primary Soviet objective in all this is to split Western Europe from the United States or to use the European allies to put pressure on Washington to return to a policy of détente.

Some diplomats report that Soviet officials have told them that there is a faction in Moscow that is prepared to wait, but not very long, and that already believes the Reagan Administration will never change its course.

Among the kinds of comments diplomats and private visitors report having heard from Soviet officials six or more months ago and report hearing now are these:

On the strategic arms limitation talks, the Russians used to say that a failure of the Reagan Administration to adhere to the unratified SALT II treaty could lead to a breakdown in Soviet-American relations. Now, they are saying that if Washington exceeds the terms of any arms control agreements, Moscow will respond in kind. The message here seems to be that they will match American strategic programs that exceed arms control limits on a tit-for-tat basis rather than tossing all the treaties out entirely.

On Afghanistan, they used to state privately that they would not withdraw their troops until they were firmly in control of the political situation. Now, they are hinting that a deal could be struck: Soviet forces out of Afghanistan in return for a sharp curtailment of the new American Rapid Deployment Force. Their argument is that since the Administration explains the need for the Rapid Deployment Force as a response to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, the removal of the presence should vitiate a need for the force.

On China, Soviet officials have been emphatic all along that an American decision to sell arms to Peking would have the most dangerous consequences. Now that the Reagan Administration

has made this decision in principle, they say that the atmosphere in Moscow has soured bitterly toward Washington, but they do not add that their superiors have planned any countermoves.

On Poland, their public rhetoric and private asides are far less threatening than before. But conversations on this subject always seem to end with the note that if necessary to maintain control, Moscow will use force.

A Fundamental Reassessment

Six months ago, the standard line of Soviet officials and diplomats was that a hard-line Reagan foreign policy would lead rather quickly to increased Soviet activity against the United States. They talked specifically of a fundamental reassessment of policy that would be made at the Communist Party Congress in February.

Many experts, like Prof. Seweryn Bialer of Columbia University, said in interviews that Soviet leaders did look at the alternatives to détente at the party congress and decided to try to keep some semblance of a relationship with the new Administration — although without making unilateral concessions.

At this time, Professor Bialer and a number of Administration officials believe that Soviet leaders reckoned that bad relations with Washington would be more of a problem than good relations with Western Europe would be a prize. In Professor Bialer's words, "They believed that the Reagan Administration was serious about an arms buildup, and they were terribly afraid of an arms

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